Kurt Wenner, Anamorphic Chalk Artist

By Ed Bertha

Kurt Wenner is a master artist and architect famous for inventing three-dimensional pastel drawings, a form of anamorphic art, or the art of illusion. In reality his work is the logical mathematical continuation of "the perspective". In town for the Sarasota Chalk Festival Kurt Wenner gets REAL.

EB: Why Rhode Island School of Design?

KW: I wanted to study with David McCauley, who wrote many books on cathedrals, how things work, and that interested me. I liked how he used his writing to explain things. He'd make a story about things people didn't know about. I read his first book when I was really young. It was about a gothic cathedral where he illustrated the story of building the cathedral, all the steps and things that occurred during the construction. A lot of people have done it since but he was the first.

EB: Kurt reflect back on your time at NASA.

KW: When I was at NASA I drew unmanned spacecraft; Voyager, extraterrestrial vehicles that traveled to Jupiter and Saturn. At that time there was no CGI, no computer graphics or CAD. We sat there with ruling pens and drew all the spacecraft for the missions, by hand. They did the calculations with slide rules back then, too. In the past few years I realized it was the last days of a very long tradition where NASA hired artists to draw the spacecraft. It actually was the end of a longer tradition going back maybe 2,000 years, and it just kind of abruptly ended with the advent of computers and computer graphics.

EB: Tell us about your voyage into classical art.

KW: When I went to school I studied with some of the last people in any academic environment that did classically-based figurative drawing. I loved it and thought it was tremendously important. The more I looked at it the more I realized it was another tradition where we had maybe 2,000 years of human experience wrapped up in this particular kind of art, that we just kind of discarded all of a sudden. It was so interesting, a big part of our human experience. So I started to study it to understand what we gave up, what we lost in a way. And that voyage landed me in Rome where I started street painting to pay for my studies.

EB: How did your 3D street art evolve?

KW: The first two years I copied masterpieces, very classical images based on the history of Italian art. Slowly I started experimenting with the perspective, part of a larger basis of geometry that I always enjoyed in my life. Combining the perspective with street and the classical drawings, that's what created 3D pavement art. Slowly it crossed the world and created a new art form.

EB: What is the most challenging aspect of rendering chalk in 3D?

KW: The most challenging aspect is you don't see what you are doing. You have to understand it intellectually. When you are sitting on the ground there is almost no possibility to judge what you are doing by eye. You are really using your mind to know you are doing the right thing. So for me the challenge is to sit in one place for eight hours and just move the drawing along; to be able to do it without standing up and looking at it. The business of stepping back and judging by eye what you are doing doesn't exist and doesn't apply to this particular art form. You have no chance to do that.

EB: What is your largest work of art and how long did it take to complete?

KW: You can see it over here. Let me show you. The largest work I've done was Greenpeace in Belgium. You can see how large it is. That's a person standing on it. Greenpeace is twenty-two meters round and it took about three weeks of work, eight to ten hours a day. You need to work a lot because the artwork doesn't last that long, so you need to go quickly. I try to complete five meters a day when I am working, so that's three and one half feet by ten feet. I don't put my stock in making huge pieces, but the client, Greenpeace, wanted it huge. My personal favorite size is sixteen to twenty feet by twenty feet. That's where I'm most comfortable and feel more relaxed doing it. Recently they seem to be getting bigger though.

EB: What do you like best about the Sarasota Chalk Festival?

KW: I started the first chalk festival in the U.S. in Santa Barbara (CA) in 1987. My vision was to bring in many artists from abroad and make it a real showcase for what people were doing around the world. It never got to that. What Denise (Kowal) does is take the art form more seriously and fly in people who have different experiences, making it a much more important event. Instead of just having one headline artist and a bunch of local artists, you have people from around the world coming here. For many of the artists it is the first time they have seen each other's work. So she's not only creating an event for Sarasota, but an event that will actually have an influence on the art form itself, which is what the other events haven't managed to do.

EB: What's next for Kurt Wenner?

KW: I'm writing a book on artist geometry. It starts at the very beginning of geometry, in the ancient world, to the present day with CAD and computers. The idea is at different times, when there's been an invention, the drawing board was an invention, the T-Square was an invention, each one of these inventions cuts the past off. So a lot of knowledge was lost over the centuries. For example with the invention of numbers ancient geometry was damaged. When numbers were invented we could add and subtract and when Arabic numbers came to Europe it kind of destroyed the ancient way of doing things. In my book I'm collecting all this knowledge, because if you are not mechanically drawing things the problem is you don't get a feeling for the underlying issues and problems. In other words what was intuitive to an artist when they were actually using a T-Square and straight edge is not intuitive to someone when they are using a computer. So if you want to use a computer, and still want understand proportions and points of view, you have to study them to understand them.

Greenpeace
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